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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Joint written statement* submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status; the World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna-Asheri Muslim Communities, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[17 February 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Protecting the girl child and eradicating female genital mutilation

The Al-khoei Foundation is submitting this statement to appeal to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children and States to continue to push for greater campaigning and legislation against the harmful practice and human rights violation of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

The Al-khoei Foundation is an international charitable organisation, founded in 1989 by the late Shia Muslim spiritual leader Ayatollah Al-khoei, which has had General Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council since 1998. The Foundation works at local, national and international levels for the education and welfare of the Muslim community, and initiates many project which promote the empowerment of women and youth. We have continued our work with women and young girls with the aim of enlightening and educating them through various seminars and workshops.

The Al-khoei Foundation provides high quality education around the world at its schools for children in London, New York, Montreal and Pakistan, and other educational programmes in the Middle East, Paris and Thailand. Our schools follow the national curriculum and focus on building strong moral and ethical characters in our students, promoting respect for all humanity. Worldwide responsibility is taught through engagement with the poor and disadvantaged in other communities, for example the Al Kawthar Widows and Orphans project in Iraq. The Al-khoei Foundation also recognizes the role of teachers in schools as professionals who may be able to recognize signs of abuse in girls and families and to educate them regarding the existence of violence against women and prevention.

We believe that Female Genital Mutilation, in all its forms, is a grave violation of the rights of girls and women and represents a gross act of violence to the young girls on which Female Genital Mutilation is practised- most often between infancy and the age of fifteen. The Al-khoei Foundation believes that Female Genital Mutilation is child abuse and a violation of the child's right to life, their right to mental and physical integrity, as well as their right to health. An estimated 125 million women worldwide are thought to have been the victims of FGM in the 29 countries in the Middle East and Africa where it is most concentrated. The European Parliament estimates that more than half a million girls living in Europe have been subjected to FGM, who will most frequently return to their countries of origin during school holidays where they are confronted with the pressure to undergo the practice.

Female Genital Mutilation can have serious consequences for a woman's health and in extreme cases can even lead to death. FGM includes procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons and the procedure has no health benefit for women and girls, which interferes with the natural functions of girl's and women's bodies. The right to the highest attainable standard of health is a fundamental right of all children, yet this is stripped away from young girls by the many lifelong health complications that they experience as a result of this practice. The Al-khoei Foundation is increasingly concerned about the medicalization of the practice of FGM, with around 18% of cases now being carried out by health care providers, and calls for more research to be done in this field so that medicalization and a new standard of normalization of the practice can be eradicated.

The Al-khoei Foundation would like to unequivocally state that FGM is not a religious requirement and has no place in Islam. Causing harm and distress is not condoned by our faith, yet it is still sadly practiced in some communities who claim it to be under the remit of their culture or religion. It is an unfortunate reality that falsehoods attributed to the Islamic tradition continue to be used as a pretext for the suppression of women in the contemporary world. The Al-khoei Foundation promotes the prescription of women and children's rights to live safe from harm and with opportunities for personal development and autonomy. We believe that FGM reflect deep-rooted inequality between men and women, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women and girls. The status of women is affected by their rights in society, and we believe that eradicating this form of violence against children will have unmitigated benefits for the societies which currently practice FGM.

We echo the sentiments of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, who told the UN General Assembly in 2013 that "harmful practices inflicted on women or girls can never be justified in

the name of religion," and his condemnation that "[c]ountless women are exposed to complex forms of human rights violations based on both religion or belief and their sex."

The Al-khoei Foundation is undertaking steps within the United Kingdom to work on the issue of FGM on an intrafaith and interfaith level, by becoming a signatory to an FGM Declaration for religious groups which condemns the practice of FGM and states firmly that FGM is not a religious or religiously-condoned practice. Research has shown that if practicing communities themselves decide to abandon FGM, the practice can be eliminated very rapidly. The Al-khoei Foundation wants to be part of the solution to this ongoing children's rights crisis, and urges leaders from all faiths to speak out against this extreme practice and contribute to the reduction in violence against children.

Accordingly, we would like to make a number of suggestions to the following parties:

Faith Leaders

- We call upon faith leaders to speak out against FGM within their faith communities and ensure that their followers know that FGM is not condoned as a religious practice.
- To work together with other faith communities to create unified statements, campaigns and raise awareness in ways which promote the eradication of this practice.
- To remove any linkages between this horrific practice and justifications that are made using faith and/or culture.

States

- We call upon States to outlaw FGM as a practice if this has not already been done.
- If FGM has already been outlawed, to prosecute offenders and to find ways to prevent girls being subjected to the practice when visiting their country of origin.
- To continue to work internationally with other States and NGOs to tackle the ongoing practice and thinking behind FGM.